

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11
COME-00 EB-08 LAB-04 SIL-01 /079 W
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R 151809Z MAY 78
FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6138
INFO AMCONSUL BELFAST
AMCONSUL EDINBURGH

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E. O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, UK
SUBJECT: OUTLOOK FOR HAMILTON BY-ELECTION

REF: (A) LONDON 5858; (B) LONDON 7070; (C) LONDON 6247

SUMMARY: THE RECENT GARSCADDEN BY-ELECTION, THE RESULTS OF THE SCOTTISH LOCAL ELECTIONS AND OPINION POLL DATA ALL INDICATE SUPPORT FOR THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY (SNP) HAS DECLINED SIGNIFICANTLY. AS A RESULT, THE GOVERNMENT HAS CALLED THE HAMILTON BY-ELECTION FOR MAY 31. LABOR IS THE CLEAR FAVORITE TO RETAIN THE SEAT, AGAIN STANDING OFF AN SNP CHALLENGE. END SUMMARY.

1. THE RESULTS OF LAST MONTH'S GLASGOW GARSCADDEN BY-ELECTION (REF A), THE LOCAL ELECTIONS IN SCOTLAND (REF B) AND RECENT OPINION POLL DATA (REF C) ALL INDICATE THAT SUPPORT FOR THE SNP HAS FALLEN OFF MARKEDLY IN THE PAST EIGHT MONTHS AND THAT LABOR HAS RE-ESTABLISHED ITS POLITICAL ASCENDANCY IN SCOTLAND. CONSEQUENTLY, THE GOVERNMENT REVERSED ITS EARLIER DECISION TO DELAY THE HAMILTON BY-ELECTION UNTIL THE FALL AND DECIDED TO EXPLOIT ITS
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CURRENT POPULARITY TO DELIVER ANOTHER REVERSE TO THE NATIONALISTS. FOLLOWING A RAPID SELECTION PROCEDURE TO NAME A CANDIDATE TO SUCCEED THE DECEASED LABOR MP, THE GOVERNMENT FIXED MAY 31 AS ELECTION DAY. IT OPTED FOR A WEDNESDAY POLLING DAY RATHER THAN THE TRADITIONAL THURSDAY BECAUSE THE LATTER DATE WOULD CONFLICT WITH SCOTLAND'S APPEARANCE IN A WORLD CUP FOOTBALL MATCH

WHICH IS EXPECTED TO KEEP SCOTS GLUED TO THEIR TVS.

2. GEORGE ROBERTSON, A YOUNG, MODERATE MEMBER OF THE SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE OF THE LABOR PARTY AND TRADE UNION OFFICIAL WAS SELECTED AS THE LABOR CANDIDATE TO FACE THE SNP'S CHALLENGER, VICE CHAIRMAN (AND FORMER MP) MARGO MACDONALD. THE CONSERVATIVE CANDIDATE IS LORD ALEX SCRYMGEOUR, WHILE THE LIBERALS HAVE NOMINATED FRED MCDERMID, A LOCAL MAN WHO HAS CONTESTED THE SEAT SEVERAL TIMES, BUT WITHOUT HOLDING HIS DEPOSIT. AS NEITHER THE TORIES NOR THE LIBERALS RUN WELL IN HAMILTON, THE RACE WILL BE BETWEEN ROBERTSON AND MACDONALD. MACDONALD WAS INITIALLY CONSIDERED A FAVORITE TO TAKE THE SEAT -- IN PART BECAUSE THE SNP WON THE SEAT ONCE BEFORE IN A 1967 BY-ELECTION -- AND THE GOVERNMENT'S ORIGINAL DECISION TO DELAY THE BY-ELECTION WAS PREDICATED ON THAT SITUATION, BUT THE ODDS HAVE NOW SWUNG HEAVILY IN LABOR'S FAVOR. IN THE RECENT LOCAL ELECTIONS LABOR WON ALL THREE HAMILTON COUNCILLOR POSITIONS, DESPITE A RELATIVELY LOW TURNOUT, EASILY OUTDISTANCING SNP CHALLENGERS.

3. COMMENT: AT THIS POINT WE BELIEVE ROBERTSON WILL RETAIN THE HAMILTON SEAT FOR LABOR, THOUGH WE UNDERSTAND THE TORY CANDIDATE IS CONSIDERED A WEAK ONE BY OFFICIALS OF HIS PARTY AND MAY NOT BE ABLE TO WIN BACK MANY OF THE CONSERVATIVE VOTERS WHO SWITCHED THEIR ALLEGIANCE TO THE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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SNP IN OCTOBER 1974. THIS COULD HELP THE SNP, PARTICULARLY IN A LOW TURNOUT.

4. IF, AS EXPECTED, THE SNP LOSES THIS BY-ELECTION, IT WILL BE THAT PARTY'S THIRD SUCCESSIVE ELECTORAL SETBACK, AND A HEAVY BLOW TO PARTY MORALE AND CONFIDENCE, SINCE SUCH A RESULT WOULD REAFFIRM THE PARTY'S RECENT DECLINE IN POPULARITY. IN THIS REGARD, THE SNP APPEARS PARTICULARLY SENSITIVE TO SUCH REVERSES, SINCE IT HAS MADE SUCH A BIG THING OF ITS HERETOFORE CONSISTENT POPULAR GROWTH. CONVERSELY, AN SNP WIN WOULD HELP RESTORE THE PARTY'S ALREADY SAGGING CONFIDENCE AND GIVE IT ANOTHER VOICE -- AND AN ABLE ONE -- AT WESTMINSTER. BUT IF THERE IS A FALL ELECTION, THE SECOND ADVANTAGE WOULD PROBABLY BE SHORT-LIVED. THE SNP HAS NEVER RETAINED A SEAT WON IN A BY-ELECTION IN THE FOLLOWING GENERAL ELECTION, AND THERE IS NO REASON TO SUPPOSE THAT HAMILTON WOULD NOT RETURN TO THE LABOR FOLD IN THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION, JUST AS IT DID FOLLOWING THE 1967 ELECTION. ACCORDINGLY, WHILE A LABOR LOSS WOULD BE A LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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SETBACK FOR THE GOVERNMENT AND TROUBLING TO CALLAGHAN, IT WOULD NOT BE PARTICULARLY SIGNIFICANT, GIVEN LABOR'S RECENT PERFORMANCE AND ITS CURRENT STANDING IN SCOTLAND.

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